

You've probably heard the term "culture shock" before, but perhaps you think it won't affect you. In fact, everyone goes through a process of adapting to a new culture when abroad, and reactions can range from mild irritation to extreme trauma. When entering a foreign culture, the cues and clues you normally rely on are gone. Your routine changes completely, and you may have to get used to a lack of privacy or personal space. You'll need to learn new structures, and abide by new rules. Some people experience culture shock so strongly that they believe they need to return home, but the whole process of cultural adaptation is a rite of passage, and being prepared can make a big difference.

Culture Shock or Culture Fatigue: What Is It?

When you move into a drastically different cultural context, all of a sudden your worldview is inappropriate. Not only do you need to learn quickly about your host culture, you also need to adjust your own behavior and tolerance in order to function effectively. The source of your culture shock may come from marked differences in any or all of the following areas of life: customs, beliefs, ceremonies and rituals, social institutions, values, morals, ideals, accepted modes of behavior, ideas and thought patterns, laws, language and the arts. Everything from public transportation and accommodation to security and social life may be significantly different. The term "culture shock" describes the stress brought on by all these changes, but because the term is sometimes considered to have a negative connotation, some experts prefer to use the term "culture fatigue," while others refer to the reaction as "cultural disorientation" or "change shock."

(See *The Culture Iceberg* at the end of this article.)

The Stages of Culture Shock

Culture shock is actually part of a completely natural process of cultural adaptation. Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists have divided the culture shock or fatigue phenomenon into four stages: the honeymoon stage, the anxiety stage, the rejection or regression stage, and the adjustment stage. Experts agree that half the battle with culture shock/fatigue is to know what is happening to you. So, let's take a look at the four common stages:

- **The Honeymoon Stage:** You're finally abroad after much preparation and anticipation. You just can't wait to see, feel, taste, experience everything! People seem friendly (not pushy), and laid back (not inefficient). They enjoy the simple things. This is the world seen through the honeymooner's eyes. You have great expectations and a positive outlook. This period may last from a few weeks to a month, but a letdown inevitably comes.
- **The Anxiety Stage:** In this stage, you're faced with building a new social structure to replace the one you left behind. You may react to small difficulties as if they were major catastrophes. You may seek out fellow expats to reinforce an "us vs. them" attitude. At this crisis stage, any of the following symptoms may occur: homesickness, boredom, withdrawal, insomnia or oversleeping, loss of appetite, compulsive eating or drinking, irritability, chauvinistic or patronizing behavior, negative feelings about host nationals and their culture, loss of ability to work effectively, physical ailments, etc.
- **The Rejection or Regression Stage:** Your anxiety is compounded by constantly having to face problems you cannot define. Things don't work—government bureaucracy is frustrating, Internet access is sporadic, and using the foreign keyboard is a hassle. Things are constantly breaking down and repairs are shoddy. The streets don't match the maps. You can't communicate properly (can't anyone speak English?). Tension and anxiety build up. Your new friends from the first few weeks have disappeared, carrying on with their lives. Eventually you reject what you had so enthusiastically embraced in those first weeks, and long for the way things are done at home. Some people manifest antisocial behavior, such as rudeness or isolation. Others seek a safe haven – an international club, for example. Some people never get beyond the regression stage, even if they live overseas for years. Others may leave during this stage. There's no shame in going home knowing that you gave it your best.
- **The Adjustment Stage:** Gradually, you recover. You begin to feel less isolated and hopeless. You're able to greet people in the local language, hail a taxi and haggle with merchants. You experience a measure of biculturalism, and acceptance of the differences between two societies. No one expects you to totally assimilate or to approve of questionable practices,

should they be present. Instead, you find a middle ground that you're comfortable with. Some people even excel in this stage, finding their stride in the new host culture and feeling at ease. Note that even after this stage, it is possible to "relapse" into anxiety or regression. Once your first low is over, remember that you may have another, and it may be more severe. But keep in mind that usually you will reach glorious stage four – and finally adjust.

(See the *U-Curve of Adjustment* at the end of this article.)

How to Deal with Culture Shock

Culture shock is like most any disease; it has symptoms and cures. Try to make peace with the fact that adjustment will not happen over night, but will instead take time and effort. Here are a few pointers for coping:

- **Go with the flow:** When you find yourself being judgmental, simply try to accept the different values and behaviors in your host culture. Try to understand the local culture rather than judging it.
- **Participation:** Instead of sitting around your apartment or house reflecting on your sorry state, go out and socialize with locals. Get involved by joining a class or group. Become engaged, and keep in mind that you are a student of the local culture, and every experience is an opportunity to learn.
- **Tolerance:** Undoubtedly, many things will appear strange to you in the beginning. Don't over-examine the local behaviors and customs. Keep in mind that although they may be different, they are neither better nor worse than your own.
- **Language:** It always helps to understand, if not to speak, the language. Who cares if your grammar and pronunciation are muddled? Your efforts will be appreciated and help you connect.
- **Find a sympathetic host national:** Other expats are helpful, but they're usually in the same boat as you. A host national can provide a better sounding board for your concerns. And what could be better for your overall experience than having a friend who knows your new country inside and out?
- **Gather information:** Never lose your curiosity. It will give you insight into why people behave as they do. An interest in the history, geography, politics, religion and cultural norms will help you appreciate and adjust to your new environment.
- **Take a break:** Treat yourself to a day off. Bake an apple pie. Take a long, hot bath. Listen to your favorite music. Do something just for yourself, something that is typically North American.
- **Maintain contact with family and friends back home:** Writing or Skype-ing home can help you cope. Be cautious, however, about potentially alarming your relatives about cultural situations they cannot understand or act upon. Keeping a diary or blog is also a good idea.
- **Don't romanticize your life at home:** Although you may want to maintain contact with family and friends, and may long for some elements of life back home, don't sulk or spend too much time idealizing your home culture.
- **Accept that culture shock is a process and that you will make it through:** The most valuable thing you can do for yourself is to accept that culture shock is inevitable. Whether it is mild or strong, you will go through an extended process of adaptation in your host culture. Understand the phases, recognize the symptoms and move through the process with confidence that full adaptation is just a few weeks away.
- **Understanding culture shock is an important part of your professional international skill set:** Once you've been abroad, you've gained first-hand experience of the culture shock process. Demonstrate your understanding to potential employers; show that you recognize the stages of culture shock, its symptoms and its cures. This is valuable in any international workplace.

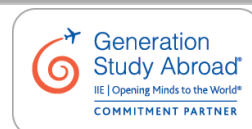
Conclusion

No matter how many books or videos you watch about your host culture, landing on the ground will be a completely different experience. From your first contact with your new surroundings, the cultural adaptation process begins. Motivation, understanding and a sense of humor will be your best friends throughout this process. We wish you the best of luck on your cross-cultural adventure, and hope you feel the true satisfaction of arriving at the final adjustment stage!

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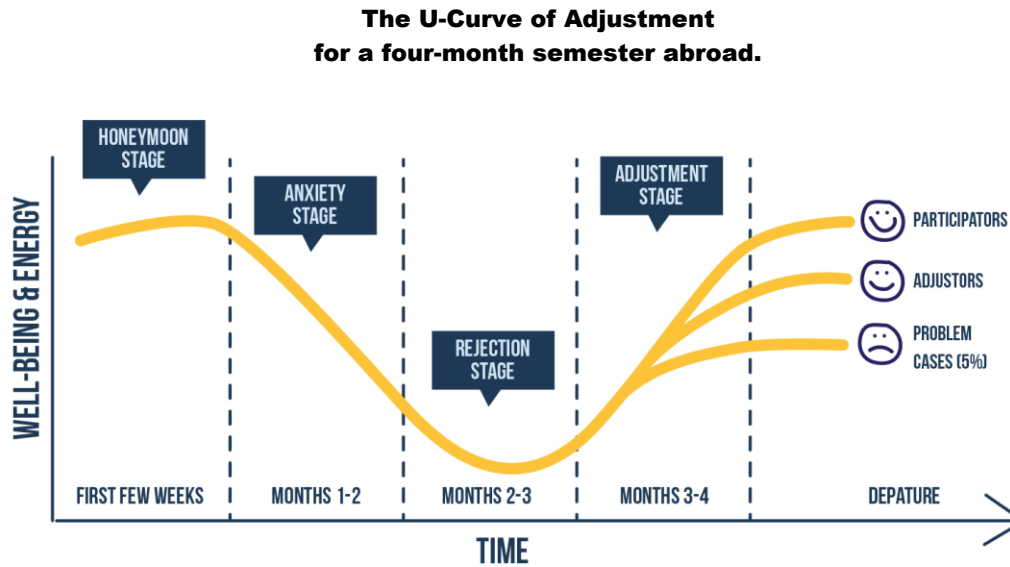
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The U-Curve of Adjustment: Four-month Semester Abroad

In the 1950s, Norwegian sociologist Sverre Lysgaard built a visual model showing the stages of cultural adjustment. *The U-Curve of Adjustment* reveals the progress from initial euphoria upon arrival, to the anxiety and crisis phases, and finally to adjustment and integration. The diagram below is our interpretation of Lysgaard's original, and it's geared toward the four-

month semester abroad. This diagram will help you keep the natural four-part adjustment process in mind as you pack up and head overseas. If you're going abroad for a full year, you can expect the first three phases to have the same duration, and the final adjustment phase to be extended.



The Culture Iceberg

When we see an iceberg, we first notice the portion that can be seen above water. In reality, this part of the iceberg represents only a small part of a much bigger whole. Cultures also follow this general principle. The characteristics that are obvious to newcomers (the “above water” characteristics) represent the tip of the iceberg. Art, language, social interactions, traditions, etc. can all be seen at this surface level. But these elements are directly tied to the deeper, less visible elements of culture – those that lie below the surface. This part of the iceberg represents deep-seated values, beliefs and worldviews. Observable behaviors are a direct result of this invisible reality, but it takes effort to understand or even recognize the connection.

When engaging with a new culture, be aware that you don't just engage with the “tip of the iceberg.” This will ensure that you're on the path towards real cross-cultural understanding rather than just superficial observation and interaction. Keep in mind also that the amount of time spent abroad is a big factor in this equation. The longer you spend in your host country, the deeper your understanding of its culture. A two-week Spring Break visit opens you up to surface culture, while longer terms abroad give you access to deep culture.



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